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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**
Mitchell, J. (2018). Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel. *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, *4*(1), 53-72. https://doi.org/10.18193/sah.v4i1.125

**Studies in Arts and Humanities** **VOL**04/**ISSUE**01/2018
*ARTICLE* | sahjournal.com

# Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel

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## Abstract

*This article explores literary representations of women over the centuries, from the witch of children's fairy tales to the madwoman of the nineteenth century and the sexually voracious vamp of the twentieth century. Within this context, it examines the gothic novels Rebecca (Daphne du Maurier, 1938) and Wide Sargasso Sea (Jean Rhys, 1966) in relation to theories of Julia Kristeva and Margrit Shildrick. Both Kristeva and Shildrick explore the perception of the female form as 'abject' and relate this concept to the notion of the 'monstrous feminine' in cinema and literature. This article will also examine how these novels have taken the traditional tropes of the gothic genre and subverted them to expose the frustrations of mid-twentieth-century women.*

*The gothic literary genre, initially dominated by male authors, has always been a natural home for both monsters and binary depictions of womanhood. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, this binary view presented women as either angelic wives and mothers, or threats to family life and society. The gothic genre also explores the blurring of lines between these two elements of the binary female, and the terrifying idea of the monster in the home. Both Rebecca and Wide Sargasso Sea belong to a female gothic genre, and specifically to what Michelle A. Massé defines as the 'marital gothic', deploying many of the traditional motifs of the Gothic while striving to subvert depictions of womanhood shaped by patriarchal culture. The marital gothic subgenre exposes the rage of women entrapped in traditional, reductive and confining notions of femaleness, and the uncanny environment of the institution of marriage itself.*

*Keywords: Western literature (Western countries); Married life; Women; Gothic fiction (Literary genre)*

# Introduction

### The creation of a monster

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.
>
> Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus'

Humanity has a long-established fascination with the monstrous and the monster in all its forms. On one level, this interest relates to fear and mirrors the disoriented state of our collective imagination in a world of shifting boundaries. However, the monstrous is also a subject of curiosity, reflecting a desire to understand that which is hidden or unknowable, even within the self: each particular monster tells a story about the values and fears of its creators. Though monsters have assumed many guises over the centuries—from goblins, ghouls and vampires to the psychotic killers in horror films — it is in the gothic context that a monster finds his or her natural home.

The gothic is a literary or visual expression of what Julia Kristeva in her 1982 *Powers of Horror* has called 'the abject': that which simultaneously fascinates and repels. The reason for this fascination, according to Kristeva, is that what is 'other' about the abject is also familiar. Indeed, the enduring power of the gothic may be explained by the comfortable attraction of the unpalatable, as well as the shock it produces.

Furthermore, as Anne Williams remarks in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, gothic plots are often domestic in nature and centred around danger that arises in the home: threats emanate from the house-guest, the sister, or the wife. As these plots are commonly set in a family home, women in domestic roles are often situated at the heart of the narrative. Although the role of women in gothic literature was initially confined to that of characters created by male writers, the gothic genre gradually enticed female novelists and poets. Today, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are all recognised as some of the finest examples of literature in the gothic tradition.

The gothic has never been a singular force; it may be divided into two strands, one written by women and one by men. Are these works differentiated by more than the gender of their authors? This article will seek to answer that question and will explore the differences between the male gothic and its female analogue. As a component of the female branch of this tradition, I focus on what Michelle Massé refers to as the 'marital gothic' subgenre, which is operative within this gendered context.

This article will also discuss the literary representations of the female body and womanhood over the ages, with emphasis on Kristeva's theory of abjection supported by Margrit Shildrick's view on the monstrous body (2002) and Freud's concept of 'the uncanny'. I apply these theories to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* while focusing on the diegesis of each narrative and both the sublime and abject aspects of the 'heterotopias'[1] in which these novels are set. Finally, I consider the centrality of gender to the gothic genre as it relates to the challenging and subversive power of the marital gothic.

[1] 'Heterotopia' is a term originally used in human geography. Michel Foucault employed it to denote a space of 'otherness'; a space, or a number of spaces which do not exist, but are viewed through the prism of reality, and therefore reflect back an image of our own society or ourselves.

# Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection, Subversion and the Female Body

## Literary Representations of the Female Body: A Historical Perspective

> For all our cultural and technological sophistication, we have inherited, in western countries, an ideological burden that explicitly associates women with danger, particularly in the spheres of sexuality and maternity.
>
> Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster:Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*

The othering of the female body—through the vilification of femaleness, female sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth—is not a new occurrence. Aristotle, like Freud and Lacan much later, identified women as incomplete or deformed males.[2] The Book of Leviticus, likewise, teaches that 'whenever a woman has her menstrual period, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean until evening'.[3]

Why are women perceived as unclean, untrustworthy or sexually voracious? There are a number of potential theories, including fear of the fluidity[4] and fecundity of the female body, and anxiety regarding the mother-child bond and the associated principle of *Mater semper certa est*.[5] Whatever the reason, this deep-seated belief that women are in some way biologically and socially inferior due to their reproductive ability has created deep unease in the collective psyche, and a need to harness female reproductive power.

These attitudes towards women, which permeated all strata of religious and civil life, were also visible in artistic and literary expression. The aforementioned social and political prejudices first seeped into myth and legend and subsequently affected all representation of women in art, sculpture, theatre and the modern novel. These representations serve a dual purpose: they reflect reality while reinforcing stereotypes.

## Creating a Monster: From Witch to Hysteric

In the first of her 1994 Reith lectures, Marina Warner remarks that 'we pick and choose bad mothers to suit our times'. It could equally be said that we pick bad women to suit our times. From Circe and Medea of antiquity, to the generic evil stepmother of fairy tale, to Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, film and literature are littered with examples of the female beast. She has morphed many times, but the fear that she engenders is consistent. Two of the most enduring tropes of the female monster are the witch and the madwoman.

Representations of the witch are varied and complex, belonging to myth, history, theology and literature. She (and it is almost exclusively 'she') has always lived on the margins of society, but has been viewed as a being empowered to abduct men, petrify the objects of her

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[2] Aristotle discusses the differences between the sexes in his text, *Generation of Animals*, where he identifies the birth of female infants as the most common form of deformity, and identifies women as the beginning of the category of monster.

[3] Leviticus 15:19-33. The practice of deeming women to be unclean during their menses and separating them from the rest of their community continues today in certain parts of the world and the practice of 'churching' – a purification ceremony conducted to wash away the sin of childbirth- continued to be carried out by Catholic priests until 1967.

[4] The use of the word 'fluidity' here refers to Margrit Shildrick's theory of the fear engendered by 'leaky bodies' and the fluids emitted by the female body during menses, childbirth, etc.

[5] This is a Latin phrase, meaning 'motherhood is always certain'. While this legal principle no longer exists in domestic laws of many countries today due to developments in reproductive medicine and growth in the practice of surrogacy, it was traditionally seen as the foundation of maternal rights, as gestation was seen as the determinant of motherhood. A father, on the other hand, could never be certain that a child was his.

desire and, perhaps most terrifyingly, render men impotent.[6] The roots of the literary witch lie in historical events and are a matter of theological record: the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries left communities divided and thousands dead.

It could also be argued that anxiety about witches was related to a general anxiety about women. The infamous fifteenth-century witch-hunters' guide, *Malleus Maleficarum* [*Hammer of the Witches*] tapped into male unease around female sexuality. This text provides a basis for the fear that, left unmonitored, every woman was as lascivious, powerful and dangerous as a witch, remarking that 'woman [is nothing more than] a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil…'.[7]

While often depicted as an old crone, withered and bitter, the most frequent literary depiction of the witch is what Barbara Creed termed the *femme castratrice*,[8] an image frequently spiked with sexual titillation. Though Arthur Miller's 1953 play, *The Crucible,* rejects any supernatural interpretation, it nevertheless reinforces these historical stereotypes through an emphasis on androcentric morality. Elizabeth, the wife of the play's protagonist, John Proctor, invites blame for her husband's infidelity and social disgrace by telling him that 'it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery'.[9] Meanwhile Abigail, the adolescent object of Proctor's transgression, is painted as the apocryphal 'bad woman', driven by lust and hysteria. *The Crucible*'s tragically delusional antagonist may not be a witch, but she is painted as a seductress: a vengeful 'little girl' who is ultimately responsible for the fall of a good man.[10]

While the trope of the witch has long existed in the collective consciousness, madness and hysteria have gradually replaced witchcraft as typically female afflictions. As Elaine Showalter notes in her 1987 study on women and madness, women have long been disproportionately stigmatised as mentally ill. By the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of patients in public lunatic asylums were women. Madness, especially hysteria, came to be known as 'the female malady', intertwined with the dominant view of the feminine. This period, as Bram Dijskra points out in his introduction to *Idols of Perversity*, was also the peak of the cultural war on women. As women began to gain access to education and enter the workplace in increasing numbers, literary portrayals of the hysterical woman (like Anne Catherick in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*) appeared as a form of backlash. While working women moved out of the domestic and into the public sphere, nineteenth-century representations of hysterical women pitted female madness against male rationality. Like the witch, the stereotypical madwoman lived on the fringes of society, unwilling to fulfil her domestic role—and like the witch, she was unstable and uncontrollable.[11]

**'Leaky Bodies' and the Abject: Kristeva and Shildrick**

[6] Shahrukh Hussein, *The Virago Book of Witches* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1994) xiii.
[7] Heinrich Kramer & James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1971) 43.
[8] Creed expands on Freud's argument that woman terrifies because man endows her with imaginary powers of castration. One of the ways this fear manifests itself in literature is through the myth of the *vagina dentata*. Creed herself cites cinematic examples of this, including *Cries and Whispers* (1972), but the phenomenon also exists in literature. Angela Carter plays on this myth in her short story *The Lady of the House of Love*, where her vampire queen protagonist, lonely and ravenous, sizes up her male prey: 'See, how I'm ready for you. I've always been ready for you. I've been waiting for you in my wedding dress, why have you delayed for so long … it will all be over very quickly. You will feel no pain my darling' (Carter 119).
[9] Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000) 119.
[10] As Wendy Shissel remarks in her essay, Abigail and Elizabeth are set up to represent the two perceived extremes of female sexuality. Elizabeth's frigidity and disinterest are contrasted against Abigail's sexual availability (461-473).
[11] As Showalter points out, some of the art and literature of this time romanticised hysteria and madness. In a number of works of art, the madwoman is presented as frail but beautiful. *The Female Malady* (1987), 10.

> It would be hard to find a woman who is neither a bitch nor a ninny – if so, she will be witch and fey.
>
> Celine, Letter to Milton Hindus

The vilification of the female body, according to Kristeva, is tied to a base human reaction, that of 'abjection'. The abject can be defined as a space where meaning breaks down and where boundaries between life and death, 'I' and 'Other', become blurred, leading to a need to expel that which repels us. In her essay on this topic, Kristeva identifies food loathing as the initial and most elementary form of abjection, but it features as a reaction in many aspects of the human experience, from skin on the surface of milk, to an open wound, to the female body itself. She maintains that these feelings of abjection are rooted in that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.[12] Kristeva's definition of abjection is not confined to revulsion, however, but is also a place of fascination and attraction. The abject therefore represents both apprehension and what Kristeva refers to as *jouissance,* or joy. For much of our cultural history, the female body has been viewed as imperfect: an aberration of the 'perfect' male form and consequently repugnant or even dangerous, yet close enough to this 'male default' to be familiar and even attractive. This has a destabilising force on both the male subject, who simultaneously experiences desire and revulsion, and the female object, when she discovers that she is being 'othered' and is 'no longer seen in her own right, but [is] forfeited, [and made] abject'.[13]

Kristeva places the pregnant and maternal body at the centre of the abject space. By doing so she acknowledges that as a result of her sexual and reproductive function and the assorted feelings, fluids and power interplays that this engenders, woman is 'othered'. She is presented as a grotesque form which as it 'wane[s] by candlelight, spoil[s], melt[s,] twist[s] [and] ooze[s]'.[14]

Margrit Shildrick builds on Kristeva's perception of the female body as 'neither wholly self nor wholly other', by expanding on the binary nature of the abject (2002). However, while Shildrick supports this premise,[15] she expands the abject space to include the *potential* fecundity of the female body, emphasising the association between the sexual woman and abjection; remarking that 'the question of female desire has been in the western world an endless, transhistorical source of masculinist anxiety'.[16]

What further differentiates this female monster from the standard villain is the perceived inherent duplicity of women, their 'binarism'[17] and the ensuing collision between desire and fear. Man's (and society's) need for wife, hearth, home and children is tempered by a fear of the monstrous feminine with her 'serpent's throat but honey words'.[18] As Shildrik underlines, it is not the existence of monsters which stokes most anxiety but rather that the monster lives at home, sleeps in the marital bed and is knowable (2002).

These rich binary associations are common in the gothic tradition, for not only can the trope of female monster be fully exploited in this context, but the supposed binary nature of

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[12] Kristeva. *Powers of Horror,* 4.
[13] Ibid, 5. Abjection is not confined to the male/female dynamic. Women can also place themselves in an abject space, as will be discussed later in the article.
[14] Ibid, 169.
[15] In her text, *Embodying the Monster,* Shildrick remarks that 'the pregnant body [is deemed to be] actively and visibly deformed from within', leading to a conflation of women with monsters, 31.
[16] Ibid., 62
[17] 'Binarism' is being used here to refer to the tendency of writers to present women as pure, angelic creatures or the opposite – an uncontrollable, sexually voracious creature wont to wage destruction and destroy the mores of society or the stability of the home.
[18] Marina Warner, "Reith Lectures", *Managing Monsters: Monstrous Mothers,* accessed August 12, 2017 http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/1994_reith1pdf

woman herself can be explored. In many gothic texts, women embodied both the hopes and the fears of society. This 'binarism' often manifested itself through the creation of two separate female characters, with one representing goodness and purity, and the other embodying evil.[19]

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a classic example of this ambivalent perception of womanhood. The beneficent Mina is portrayed as gentle and beloved and is ultimately rewarded with the feminine gift of motherhood at the end of the novel. The reader is reminded that 'this boy will someday know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care; later on, he will understand how some men so loved her'.[20] Mina contrasts sharply with the three female vampires encountered by Jonathan Harker earlier in the novel, who so perfectly embody the abject in the male gothic tradition. While these women are beautiful and enticing it is also implied that they are threatening, sexually voracious and have cannibalistic tendencies. He also recognises his own feelings of abjection when faced with these women, acknowledging that he 'felt some longing and at the same time some deadly fear'.[21]

**Freud's Uncanny and the Marital Gothic**

Written at the end of the nineteenth century, *Dracula* was first published in 1897, at a time when race, gender and the monstrous become tightly interwoven in art and literature. Gender in particular becomes a crucial component of the gothic tradition during this period. Women's desire for an (often futile) escape from the bonds of marriage and motherhood, and their subsequent descent into madness, was a common theme of nineteenth-century literature. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, the character of the madwoman—from Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, to the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, to Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*—can be viewed as an incarnation of the frustration and anger of female writers. It is through this fictional character that 'the female author enacts her own raging desires to escape male houses and male texts'.[22]

The natural literary environment for this character is the 'marital gothic', a sub-genre of the feminist gothic text and a term first coined by Michelle Massé in her 1992 book, *In the Name of Love.* Massé defines the marital gothic as version of the genre in which a female character discovers that 'the marriage that she thought would give her voice […], movement […] and not just a room of her own but a house proves to have none of these attributes.'[23]

While the protagonists of traditional gothic novels such as *The Castle of Ontranto* (Horace Walpole, 1765) or *Malmoth the Wanderer* (Charles Maturin, 1820) were conventionally trapped by architecture or some type of dark force, such as a vampire or monster, feminist writers of the time salvaged these same themes of imprisonment and escape and subverted them, challenging preconceptions around womanhood, maternity and creativity. The female characters of these novels did not seek to escape from a rambling old mansion or a supernatural force, but from their own lives and bodies. For many, the only escape was either death or madness.[24] Unlike earlier artistic representations of female madness, these gothic

[19] Shildrick 2002
[20] Bram Stoker. *Dracula*. London: Penguin Books, 1993. 402.
[21] Ibid, 45
[22] Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the 19th-Century Literary Imagination* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 85.
[23] Michelle Massé. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1992. 20.
[24] In Perkins Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wall Paper' (1892), the female protagonist, forced to 'rest' for long periods and denied the right to read or write, eventually succumbs to madness, believing that she and the woman in the wallpaper have become one entity. Chopin's *The Awakening* ends with Edna's death, no longer able to balance the demands of motherhood with the need for creative and sexual fulfilment.

depictions are not romanticised but act as a 'fictionalised documentary'[25] of women's lives at the time, exposing conflicts within the female psyche between a desire for protection and a feeling of entrapment in an unhappy marriage.

This subgenre could be said to mirror a concept examined by Freud in his 1919 essay on the uncanny.[26] This theory can be defined as an experience, event, object, or, indeed, an individual that is familiar yet unsettling. While initially unremarkable in its apparent ordinariness, the uncanny exposes 'a sense of weirdness, created when something that seemed safe and familiar suddenly becomes strange'[27]. This sense of familiarity is key to 'the uncanny' and indeed to the marital gothic genre, as the word *heimlich* is derived from *heim*, meaning 'home', a key element of the gothic novel. *Heimlich* can also be commonly translated as 'secret', that which is (as yet) unknown. For the young gothic bride-to-be, the secrets of married life are yet to reveal themselves. For her, a successful domestic life remains the ultimate goal, with the marital home perceived as a place of protection and safety. The semantic slippage which Freud highlights in his theory is reflected in the marital gothic novel with the introduction of a threat to the domestic sphere as *heim(lich)* morphs into *unheimlich* and that which was unknown, into a familiar yet unsettling situation. For the gothic wife, married life has promised much, including personal safety. Once she has committed to the institution of marriage, however, the institution becomes knowable and, at the same time, *unheimlich*: strange, unwelcoming and even menacing. There is, therefore, an opportunity within the marital gothic to explore how women in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries increasingly felt terrorised by the restrictive roles of wife and mother, through the concept of the uncanny.

Freud himself believed that literature provided a much more fertile ground than reality for examining the uncanny. Certainly, the abject and the uncanny are both recognisable features of the marital gothic subgenre, with the abjection of femaleness (whether through the treatment of the female body or a sexualisation of landscape) often placed at the centre of an 'uncanny' setting – the gothic marriage. While neither *Rebecca* nor *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written when the formulaic devices of the Gothic were first employed, these novels do adhere to many of the typical characteristics of the gothic subgenre, such as a fabricated history of untamed landscapes: wild seas, haunted castles, supernatural beliefs, untamed passions and the 'abject'. I will argue, however, that both novels also succeed in exploring Freud's concept of the uncanny while subverting Kristeva's theory of abjection, pushing the boundaries of this genre to expose the realities of life in the domestic sphere.

# Abjection and Subversion in Rebecca and Wide Sargasso Sea

### The Heterotopia's of *Rebecca* and *Wild Sargasso Sea*

The opening line of *Rebecca* is one of the most recognisable in the western literary canon: even those who have never read the novel are likely to be familiar with the narrator's remark that, 'last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'. As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, one of the defining features of *Rebecca* is this isolated setting, which allows for the privileging of nature and the personification of landscape as a threatening character in its own right. Indeed, the first chapter of *Rebecca* is replete with references to the natural world and the intermingling of the abject

[25]Susanne Becker. *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.
[26] Kristeva (1982) highlights the theory of 'uncanniness' in her own text, noting that while comparisons can be made between the abject and the uncanny, the abject is more violent and rejects any sense of familiarity.
[27] Charles Crowe. *American Gothic: History of the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. 7

and the sublime[28]. While examples of the sublime in this chapter focus on the vastness of the estate and the narrator's feelings of being overwhelmed by the landscape, certain verbs and adjectives such as 'stealthy', 'insidious', 'tenacious', 'naked' and 'thrusting' suggest the presence of the abject, as the new Mrs de Winter is simultaneously repelled and enthralled by her surroundings. [29] Indeed, as she recalls her dream of returning to her marital home, the narrator describes these conflicting feelings, recalling how she 'stood, [her] heart thumping in [her] breast, the strange prick of tears behind [her] eyes'[30]. The imagery employed by du Maurier here also hints at a sexualisation of the landscape, as the narrator remarks that there was 'another plant too […] marching in unison with the ivy, [which] thrust its ugly form like a giant rhubarb towards the soft grass'[31].

This use of sexualised imagery in the first chapter highlights not only the abject, (in its grotesqueness) but also the role of the feminine, and female sexuality within abject space.[32] References to female sexuality appear again later in the novel as the narrator recalls her first visit to Manderley and the apparent endlessness of the driveway, which 'twisted and turned as a serpent'.[33] Her underlying unease and the feelings of claustrophobia are not simply a reaction to a negative aesthetic: they become part of a negative aesthetic as it is feminised and sexualised. This sexualization is reinforced in the repeated use of the colour red —a colour traditionally linked to female sexuality because it represented the sacrifice of virginity—in du Maurier's landscape and plant imagery.[34] A display of rhododendrons, the narrator tells us, "startled me with their crimson faces […] showing no leaf, no twig, nothing but the slaughterous red, luscious and fantastic'.[35]

This mingling of the abject and the feminised landscape is also evident in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Surrounded by the sea and mountains, Antoinette's new husband feels overwhelmed by the natural world which is 'not only wild but menacing'.[36] As in *Rebecca*, the abject seeps in through the sublime and embodies itself in the sexualisation of the landscape. Again, this feminisation of the landscape is particularly evident in references to blood or the colour red, and serpentine imagery manifests itself in 'orchids [which] flourished out of reach

[28]The diegesis of both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are set in heterotopic worlds, and reflect Edward Burke's theory on the sublime, which paralleled the rise of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century. Burke's 1757 treatise explores the differences between beauty and the sublime, arguing that beauty had a softer, subordinate and more feminine quality whereas the sublime, while still beautiful, is defined by its vastness, its ability to overwhelm and exhilarate and its association with pain and danger. Beauty is simple and one dimensional, while the sublime is complex and visceral. This is particularly relevant when discussing nature, which is central to the aesthetic experience of the gothic novel and at the heart of both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is also undoubtedly a connection between the concepts of the abject and the sublime as Kristeva herself acknowledges, remarking that 'the abject is edged with the sublime' (Kristeva, 20).

[29] du Maurier, 1.

[30] Ibid, 2.

[31] Ibid, 3.

[32] The imagery here resonates with Dijkstra's study of the depiction of the female body in nineteenth-century art, often displayed alongside a snake, cat or other animal (291-315). These animals were often positioned at groin level, mirroring the idea of Creed's *femme castratrice*.

[33] du Maurier. *Rebecca* 71.

[34] In her essay 'The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity' (1981, 243-263), Susan Gubar refers to the importance of 'blood imagery' in women's art and literature, referencing the works of Sylvia Plath, Christina Rossetti, Frida Kahlo and Adrienne Rich. '[blood] is a sign that the bride is a valuable property, given by father to husband for the production of sons'.

[35] du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 72. There are numerous references to the colour and lusciousness of the rhododendrons and their association with blood. For example, on p 93; 'yes there they were, blood-red and luscious'. Again, there are obvious sexual connotations to these observations, as if the flowers themselves embody Rebecca's spirit.

[36] ibid

[…] One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin tentacles […] The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it'.[37]

Despite the fact that the earliest gothic texts were written by men and focused on male stories, there is an argument to be made that the texts themselves, through the imagery employed, are inherently feminine. As women began writing in the gothic genre, landscapes like the wild moors of *Wuthering Heights* and the hidden spaces and untamed gardens of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* came into prominence. Yet it is not frequently acknowledged that these landscapes are themselves feminised, defined as they are by wildness, volatility and absence of light. This feminization of setting makes it possible to locate the abject in the gothic landscape – it is wild, untamed and uncontrollable, much like the 'hysterical' woman herself. The abject therefore links landscape to apprehensions about female sexuality.

Although both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* highlight what I have referred to as 'the abject' in their respective settings, and arguably reinforce corresponding stereotypical notions about female sexuality, they also strive to challenge the abject quality of the feminised landscape through an acceptance of its imperfection. As is typical of the Gothic novel, everything here is seen in binary terms: it is either 'virtuous' and has value, or 'wicked' and must be driven out. In these novels, the landscape is no exception: that which is untamed and violent is contrasted with another landscape of a more cultivated nature. In *Rebecca*, the reader is informed that Rebecca's previous bedroom overlooked the sea and that 'you could hear the sea from here, […] in the winter it would creep up on to those green lawns and threaten the house itself. […] the sea changed colour instantly, becoming black […] and cruel'.[38] However, this wildness and unpredictability is replaced with more appropriate room for the new Mrs de Winter, looking out over the calm ordered beauty of the 'rose garden [which] lay below […] while beyond the rose-garden rose a smooth grass bank'[39].

This contrast is also evident in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Here, the male narrator even uses the word 'abject' to define the landscape of Coulibri, where 'the bamboos […] bend to the earth and lie there, creaking, groaning, crying for mercy. The contemptuous wind passes, not caring for these abject things'.[40] In contrast, the English countryside of Antoinette's imaginings is somehow unreal, 'like a dream'.[41] When she finally encounters it as an effective prisoner at the end of the novel, it appears lifeless, a shadow of the world she has left behind. In place of the vastness and exhilaration of her home 'was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water'.[42]

Although the original 'home' landscape of both novels is physically deserted by the protagonists, with Antoinette leaving for England and Mrs de Winter for an undisclosed location in continental Europe, the abject itself is not isolated and driven out in either story; it is recognised as an integral part of the human condition. The alternative, the 'anti-abject'—an ordered, inoffensive, cultivated landscape—is dismissed and seen as soulless and removed from reality. Without the landscape and its inherent passion and wildness, neither protagonist is truly complete. Antoinette herself notes this sense of removal towards the end of the novel: 'Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?'[43]

[37] ibid., 5
[38] du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 101
[39] ibid, 79
[40] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 130
[41] ibid, 58
[42] ibid., 146
[43] ibid

**Haunted House, Haunted Marriage**

The centre-piece of the gothic novel is the gothic manor, which can be described as a place of 'creaking doors, dark corridors and dank dungeons'.[44] It embodies the mystery and supernatural elements of the gothic story through 'its darkness, labyrinth passageways, unsuspected doors, secret staircases, sliding panels and forgotten rooms'.[45] It privileges a particular kind of architecture, the secure and protective atmosphere of which is interchangeable with one of danger and misery. This haunted manor or ghostly mansion is undoubtedly an essential part of the fictional gothic world, but it is also central to the female gothic experience, particularly that of the 'marital gothic'.[46] As with the gothic landscape, the gothic mansion was also often home to the female abject. Much like the gothic landscape, the gothic house embodies Freud's theory of the uncanny, turning the domestic sphere into an unfamiliar and threatening place. Some critics have explored this theory on a psychological level, examining the idea that the house itself was often depicted as a physically female space; specifically, a house was a maternal space reflected in the use of secret chambers, mysterious labyrinths and locked doors to forbidden places. The house therefore becomes 'both habitat and prison' and is simultaneously associated with 'defence, penetration and entrapment'.[47] As the house is perceived as female, it taps into the male anxieties about female sexuality and childbirth outlined by Shildrick in *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* and is easily identifiable as 'abject'.[48]

The estates/dwellings which feature in *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* continue this tradition of the gothic mansion as an abject location: both are unquestionably female spaces. In *Rebecca*, the spectre of Rebecca herself haunts her former home, forcing the newly married couple to move their bedroom from one wing of their home to the other in attempt to escape her presence. The narrator can never see the house as anything other than Rebecca's space, even in an ostensibly cosy situation. As she sits, drinking coffee with her husband in front of the fire, she remains an imposter, noting that 'sitting in Rebecca's chair, [she was] was leaning against Rebecca's cushion'.[49]

In many ways, while the houses in both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are abject spaces both novels also subvert the trope of the traditional 'haunted house'. In both stories, the houses are possessed by women, whether financially, psychologically or both. Manderley is, in theory at least, the family seat of the de Winters, yet it is Rebecca who possesses it. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, both of the estates belong to women: Granbois itself not only belongs to Antoinette, but is a place where she feels infinitely more comfortable than her husband. Like Maxim in *Rebecca* (who finds solace in his library) he is confined to his father-in-law's dressing room as the sole male space in the house.[50] Even the final house—the probable Thornfield Hall where 'Bertha' the preeminent 'woman in the attic' is confined—is turned into

[44] Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom,* 4
[45] Eugenia Delamotte, *Perils of the Night,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15
[46] The relationship between gender and genre will be explored more fully later in the essay when the changing role of the gothic heroine is explored.
[47] Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror", in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation,* ed. Shirley Garner Nelson, (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 337. Kahane explores this theory further in her essay, where she discusses how the Gothic tradition frequently focuses on the figure of the 'macabre mother' (335), a maternal figure who is either missing or deceased. She also cites Leslie Fielder who sees the gothic castle as a crumbling artifice, representative of paternal authority but beneath which lies 'the maternal darkness, imagined by the gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber'.
[48] The Gothic house has traditionally been a place to escape *from* or a place to be destroyed. In *Jane Eyre,* (1847) for example, the plot is resolved after Thornfield Hall is burnt to the ground, banishing the abject.
[49] du Maurier , 87.
[50] Rhys, 53.

a female space. Although a prisoner at the mercy of others, at night she steals the keys and walks into their world.[51] Stalking the halls at night, the house becomes hers: she becomes 'the ghost'.[52]

In her feminist study of the nineteenth-century gothic, *Perils of the Night*, Eugenia Delamotte observes that '[gothic] architecture is […] a repository and embodiment of the past'.[53] For the female gothic protagonist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the typical forms of gothic architecture were also embodiments of a lived reality, defining an 'uncanny' setting from which there was no escape. While the houses of both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are possessed by women, these female owners are trapped in their own spaces. For Rebecca, Manderley is the only place where she continues to exist; for the other protagonists, the ability to remain or leavethose spaces is out of their control.

Both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* acknowledge the confined nature of women's lives during the period of their composition. but also endeavour to subvert it. While there is, therefore, an attempt to follow the gothic literary tradition of vanquishing the abject through the burning or desertion of all the 'haunted houses' in these novels, both authors reject the idea of the house as either a desirable marital home or a repressible entity. The gothic mansion is a symbol of female oppression rather than a place of protection, with the fictional mansion of the Gothic as a metaphor for women's lives and their frustrations. The 'abject house' ultimately proves to be unescapable: even when it is burned to the ground, the structures and strictures of society remain. For Antoinette, the burning of Coulibri leads to her eventual unhappy marriage, and the second deserted house leads to her further confinement. Only in the third house does she find any potential solace, as a result of her reclaiming agency over her own life. She remarks in the final chapter that 'now at last [she] knows why [she] was brought here, and what [she has] to do […] the flame flickered […] it burnt up again to light [her] along the dark passage.'[54]

# The Characters of Abjection and Subversion in Rebecca and Wide Sargasso Sea

### The Changing Face of the Gothic: From a Male Tradition to a Feminist Genre

> Marriage had bastilled her for life.
>
> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria; Or the Wrongs of Woman*

The 'male gothic' tradition of Stoker, Collins and Lewis amongst others, by dint of the period in which it was first written, fêtes male stories while confining women to the domestic sphere or 'othering' them. These tales focus on male protagonists; they are stories of male adventurers and masculine triumph[55]. The female characters who do feature in these stories are examined with a male eye, and function as plot devices rather than characters in their own right.[56] Joanna

[51] Ibid, 144.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Delamotte, 15.
[54] Rhys, 152.
[55] In *Perils of the Night*, Delamotte references Ann Radcliffe (a pioneer of the gothic novel) and notes how she was written out of any critical discussion of the genre at the time. Delamotte (1990),12.
[56] Laura Mulvey examines the theory of scopophilia and the 'male gaze' in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In this essay, she looks at the phallocentric nature of art and literature in which the woman (or feminised object) is the passive image and the man is the one in control, 'the bearer of the look'. She also notes that the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled for strong visual and erotic impact (62).

Russ highlights the restricted roles played by women in these stories by noting that the female protagonist frequently suffers in these novels— it is the only action she can perform.

There is undoubtedly an acknowledgement of this tradition in both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Despite the presence of a female narrator in both novels, both du Maurier and Rhys allow this objectifying gaze to permeate both novels, highlighting the traditional 'othering' of women and the subsequent placement of the female body in an abject space.[57]

When, in *Rebecca*, the second Mrs de Winter describes her first encounter with Maxim, she focuses on her shyness and her awkwardness, conscious of 'the silly, nervous voice of someone ill at ease'.[58] While Mrs Hopper reprimands her for 'being forward' and 'monopolising the conversation'[59], she herself is 'stricken into shame'[60] due to her feelings of inadequacy and discomfort at being included in a social group where the rules are an enigma to her, remarking that 'this including of me in the conversation found me at my worst, the raw ex-school girl, red-elbowed, and lanky -haired'[61]. Even after her marriage, ensconced at Manderley, she continues to doubt herself, feeling out of place and uncertain, 'tearing at [her] bitten nails'. It is, however, the focus on her appearance, both through her own eyes and the eyes of others, that is the most striking. Her view of herself as a young woman is so negative that she effectively places herself in the abject space. She views and judges herself as if she is outside her body, focusing not on her positive attributes but on her 'shabby hat' and her 'gauntlet gloves clutched in a grubby hand'.[62] Throughout the novel, she compares herself unfavourably to Rebecca, questioning how her husband could possibly love her 'when [she] knew [he] loved Rebecca still'.[63]

Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also feels like she doesn't belong in her world; her mother alienates her, pushing her away, 'as if she had decided once and for all that [she] was useless to her'[64], and children her own age torment her for blurring racial boundaries, being neither black Jamaican nor white European. The rules of colonialism have been torn up and Antoinette finds herself caught in the middle as the child of a former slave owner. She is not black but neither is she 'authentically' white, as remarked upon by 'English women [who] call [girls like her] white niggers'. These comments have left her with a feeling of rootlessness as she 'wonder[s] who [she is] and where is [her] country and where to [she] belong[s].'[65]

In this way, the protagonists of both novels are doubly lacking, doubly othered and their preconceived notions of domestic life are being challenged by uncannyforces. Both, of course, are 'othered' by their gender, but the spectre of postcolonialism also hangs over Antoinette's life, while a lack of money and class impacts the second Mrs de Winter.

However, it could be said that the authors of both novels are subverting the traditional male gaze to highlight the predilection of male gothic writers to view female characters as objects rather than agents of their own lives and to note the lack of fulfilment in the lives of gothic wives. The mid-twentieth century was a period of huge social upheaval, when issues of class and race dominated public discourse. It is striking, therefore, that it is the female

[57] It is important to note that a female author or narrator does not automatically negate the male gaze, as some theorists have gone as far as characterising the very act of looking as an inherently male action, imbued with an intent to penetrate, to gain authority over the 'viewed' (Lundquist 1997. 282)
[58] du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 31
[59]Ibid., 19.
[60] Ibid., 17.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 30.
[63] Ibid., 303.
[64] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 5
[65] Ibid., 76.

characters who identify feelings of inadequacy and discomfort as they move from one world to another. Both Rhys and du Maurier use the institution of marriage and their female characters' relationships to explore these shifting boundaries.

**Husbands and Wifes – Behind Closed Doors**

*Rebecca* has traditionally been seen as a romantic novel, a plot with jealousy or female rivalry at its core, but Maxim de Winter is no romantic hero: he critiques his wife's appearance, treats her with a cool aloofness and plays childish psychological games. On her arrival in Manderley, Maxim makes no effort to ease his wife's transition but instead, treating her like a child, criticises her appearance, referring to her 'grubby skirt'[66] and later tells her that any perceived criticism is a figment of her imagination.[67] When the narrator is tricked into dressing like Rebecca at a fancy-dress ball he is shaken, believing for a moment that a ghost stands before him; yet again he treats her in a passive aggressive manner, using isolation and abandonment. Mrs de Winter's recollection of the event summarises how she was made to feel: 'He never spoke to me, he never touched me […] we were divided'[68]. The most striking thing about Maxim is that this is a man who has murdered his first wife rather than divorce her. He is a man responsible for a death which he subsequently describes in detail to his second wife, a death for which he feels no remorse, saying, 'I'm glad I killed Rebecca, I shall never have any remorse for that never, never'[69], yet he can only show true affection to his second wife when he has burdened her with his secret. Only once unburdened can he begin to show her physical and emotional affection: 'he began to kiss [her], he had not kissed [her] like this before'.[70]

The behaviour of Antoinette's husband is even more malevolent: there is no mistaking him for a Gothic romantic hero. He is petulant and cruel, directing his malice towards anyone he perceives as 'alien'. His views are rooted in his horror of the 'other', which in this case is undoubtedly shaped by imperialist ideology and his fear of female sexuality. He views his wife through voyeuristic eyes; detailing and critiquing her appearance, which he deems to be 'not English, or European'.[71] Her eyes are 'too large and can be disconcerting'.[72]

He delights in humiliating his wife by having sex with one of the maids, Amélie, within earshot of his wife and feels 'not one moment of remorse'[73]. However, in the aftermath, he finds himself repulsed by Amélie's appearance; 'her skin was darker, her lips thicker', he says; and he has 'no wish to touch her'[74]. Likewise, his twisted sense of morality finds perverse pleasure in causing Antoinette distress, by denying her any feelings at all, remarking that [his] 'hate is colder, stronger […] [she] will have nothing'[75]. He revels in the knowledge that she will not 'laugh in the sun again', 'dress up', 'smile at herself' or have any power to make her own decisions.[76] The most sinister thing about him links him with Maxim de Winter: his fantasy about killing Antoinette. While lying in bed beside her, whispering to her that she is

[66] du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 161
[67] Ibid., 165.
[68] Ibid., 252.
[69] Ibid., 335.
[70] Ibid., 300.
[71] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 46
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 109.
[74] Ibid. Throughout the novel, Antoinette's husband's opinion of his wife and their surroundings are coloured by a colonial ideology. He sees difference everywhere, referring to the island and some of the islanders as 'alien'. He comments on Amélie's dark, thick lips (109), criticises the 'debased French patois' spoken on the island (47) and is surprised by Antoinette's affection for her black housekeeper, Christophine, saying; 'I wouldn't hug and kiss them' (68).
[75] Ibid., 135.
[76] Ibid., 131.

safe, he wonders to himself if she 'ever guessed how near she came to dying'.[77] The disturbing nature of this scene is emphasized by its intimacy, tying into Elaine Showalter's view of the marital bedroom as a space where abjection thrives, bringing fear of the monster into the most intimate place of all (1991). Here in this intimate space, Antoinette's husband contemplates vanquishing his wife as a personification of the abject. His enjoyment of Antoinette's suffering seems to be enriched by the feeling that he holds her life in hands, having noted earlier in the novel that he made her want to live again 'because [he] wished it.[78]

In these novels, the husbands of the female protagonists view their wives as representations of the abject other, and are themselves representations of the stifling patriarchal attitudes of the time. Antoinette and Rebecca are both 'mad' and 'bad', and though the second Mrs de Winter is originally presented as her predecessor's opposite, young and pure, she later finds herself consigned to abject space. Maxim de Winter likewise personifies the driving force of this transformation, becoming a mouthpiece for class difference and the warped gender expectations which assert control over women's appearance.

In turn, each of these female characters finds marriage to be an uncanny institution and the marital home an uncanny space, unlike the warm, intimate environment that has been expected. The protagonists of both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* grow in the awareness that their agency and lives are threatened by the institution of marriage. Indeed, as Joanna Russ comments in her 1995 study of feminism, the motto of such characters could be 'somebody's trying to kill me and I think it's my husband'.[79] While the only wife to actually die in either of these novels is Rebecca, Russ's statement taps into the feelings of claustrophobia and dissatisfaction that would have impacted many wives at the time these novels were written. As Michelle Massé notes, 'the ground of the gothic is littered with wounded and dead wives'[80]. By defining the 'marital gothic' as a specific subgenre, critics are empowered to focus on these dead wives, and expose their tragedy.

**Mend, Women and the Institution of Marriage**

The gothic is an adaptable genre, and as it grew in popularity, it became increasingly popular with women readers and with female authors. However, women have had a complex relationship with this genre [81], with earlier examples continuing to treat women as a commodity to be bought and sold. As the genre evolved, women writers began to use the gothic tradition to highlight the role of woman as 'wife' while subverting the institution of marriage itself. Unlike the romantic gothic novel, ending with a love match or wedding, the marital gothic novel focuses on the post marital scenario. It is here, as Davison remarks, that the 'sins of the husband may be said to be visited upon the wives'[82] as light is shone on the realities of marriage.

Both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* acknowledge the pressure on women to marry, yet none of these marriages are happy ones.[83] As previously noted, Massé remarks that 'the

[77] Ibid., 70.
[78] Ibid., 68.
[79] Joanna Russ. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 94.
[80] Michelle Massé. 'Gothic Repetition: Husbands, Horrors and Things that Go Bump in the Night'. *The University of Chicago Press*, Vol. 15. No.4 (summer 1990), 696.
[81] Punter. *A Companion to the Gothic* (3-12).
[82] Davison, Carol M. 'Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "the Yellow Wallpaper"'. *Women's Studies* 33 (2004), 47-75.
[83] Both *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* acknowledge the importance of marriage for women but also highlight their lack of agency when choosing a husband. Neither woman marries for love, and both barely their prospective spouse before marrying. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's husband mocks her lack of power in

ground of the gothic is littered with wounded and dead wives'[84]; it could be argued that the marital gothic is strewn with psychologically wounded, nameless women who exist purely as objects: half-dead extensions of the husband.

Such female characters are not entitled to independent identities in the world of the marital gothic, in which the husband 'believes that his wife should be a narcissistic extension of himself'.[85] *Rebecca*'s narrator is denied a name completely, and is referred to throughout as 'Mrs de Winter'.[86] Even her own husband does not call her by name, using infantile terms such as 'poor lamb'[87] or the possessive 'my darling'[88]. Only once does he even acknowledge that she has a name of her own, rather obliquely noting that she has 'an unusual name'.[89] At one point, this narrator's sense of identity becomes so tenuous that she doesn't even recognise herself. On answering the phone, she doesn't remember that she is Mrs de Winter, telling her caller, 'I'm afraid you have made a mistake, […] Mrs de Winter has been dead for over a year'.[90]

This loss of identity and the subsequent invisibility of the protagonist are even more glaring in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Like Maxim de Winter, the husband in this novel infantilises his wife, changing her name from Antoinette to Bertha, simply because 'it's a name [he's] particularly fond of'[91], a name removed from her mother Annette, and a less 'alien' name. Her identity is made mutable by men: the Antoinette Cosway of the beginning of the novel becomes Antoinette Mason due to her mother's remarriage; her own marriage later transforms her into mad Bertha. In spite of this, Antoinette's husband rarely refers to her by name at all. As with de Winter, he prefers to use possessive descriptors like 'my wife' and 'my mad girl'. While these terms, or those used by de Winter in *Rebecca,* may seem harmless or even endearing at first, they also have a reductive effect on their object, simultaneously denying them ownership of an identity. Over the course of the novel, she is reduced from a grown woman to 'a doll […] a marionette'[92]. By the end of the novel, Antoinette Cosway no longer exists. Her identity has been completely wiped out by marriage and she is nothing more than a ghost[93].

**The Abject Woman and the Sexless Wife**

As Delamotte notes, 'it is in the gothic novel that women writers could first accuse the real world of falsehood and deep disorder'[94]. Nowhere is this more evident than in the depiction of the female body and female sexuality in the marital gothic. The gothic uses and abuses a woman's body; in this genre, she is 'moved, threatened, discarded, and lost'[95]. Any woman who defies normal expectations of marriage—home and motherhood—or demonstrates an awareness of her own sexuality or interest in sex, is vilified and forced into abject space. Even within marriage, the wife who enjoys sex ends up either dead or incarcerated.

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this situation, calling her 'a stranger' (49) and mocking her attempts to avoid the marriage, stating that all she had were the 'poor weapons' of 'silence and a blank face' (67).

[84] Massé (1990), 696.
[85] Ibid., 697.
[86] This is an interesting choice of name, given that the prefix 'de' in French means 'of' or 'belonging to'
[87] du Maurier. *Rebecca,* 70.
[88] Ibid, 297.
[89] Ibid. 25.
[90] Ibid., 95.
[91] Rhys. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 105.
[92] Ibid, 124.
[93] Ibid., 129.
[94] Delamotte. *Perils of the Night,* 15.
[95] Punter. *A Companion to the Gothic,* 257-268.

Rebecca, portrayed as a rapaciously sexual being, is punished twice for her sins. What ultimately kills her is her husband, but had his bullet not ended her life, she would have been dead from cancer in a matter of months. As Dr Baker informs Maxim, there was no hope at all of a recovery; 'The thing had got too firm a hold. There is nothing anyone can do in a case like that'[96]. This punishment is particularly brutal, as Rebecca was suffering from cancer of the uterus. Not only does her sexual appetite make her an object of abjection, but her failure to reproduce and her diseased reproductive system show that her body has been symbolically plundered by the abject, driving home the point that she has failed as a wife and as a woman.[97]

Antoinette also fails as wife. Her husband, despite feeling no tenderness for her, is sexually attracted to her, recollecting that 'the sight of a dress which she'd left lying on her bedroom floor made [him] breathless and savage with desire'.[98] Yet his pleasure is all that matters, for we are told that 'when [he] was exhausted [he] turned away from her and slept, still without a word or a caress'[99]. Once Antoinette begins to enjoy sex, she becomes abject in the eyes of her husband. From then on, he is repulsed by her until, ultimately, his fear of her sexuality drives him to control her, claiming, 'she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other'.[100]

Although the sexual behaviour of Rebecca and Antoinette makes them easily identifiable as the objects of abjection, the abject space is also challenged and subverted by Rhys and du Maurier. The alternative to Rebecca's promiscuity and Antoinette's passion is the monotony of a loveless or even abusive marriage: the survivors of these novels are not the 'virtuous women' of *Dracula* or *Mysteries of Udolpho*. The second Mrs de Winter spends her days in exile. She remains trapped in a dull relationship, living a life restrained by boredom and routine and even noting at one point that they 'prefer to store up their excitement'[101]. Meanwhile, Manderley remains in Rebecca's possession even after her death while Mrs Danvers, the likely arsonist, walks away.[102] In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's husband attempts to control the abject by locking her away, yet this too backfires. Antoinette continues to haunt her husband's life, becoming 'the ghost'[103] in his new home.[104]

# Conclusion

### 'Happily Ever After'

The gothic is defined by the grotesque and the sublime, by its ability to scare the reader, and its propensity to force an audience to face its deepest fantasies and fears. It was and is a

[96] du Maurier. *Rebecca*, 412.

[97] The reader is also informed at this point in the novel that medical tests revealed that Rebecca could never have become pregnant as she had 'a malformation of the uterus' (413). This detail forms a connection with the narrator whom, we later learn, has not had children either. Despite the differences between the women, both seem to have endured unhappy and possibly sexless marriages.

[98] Rhys. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 69.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid., 131.

[101] du Maurier. *Rebecca*, 6.

[102] Rebecca's relationship with Mrs Danvers, although not fully explored in the novel, is an interesting one. There are indications throughout that Danver's feelings for Rebecca are not entirely platonic, and that it was an obsessive relationship. This should make Danvers the object of abjection—a force to be controlled or destroyed—yet she wins in the end, enacting vengeance on Rebecca's behalf by burning Manderley to the ground.

[103] Rhys. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 145.

[104] Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is another 'abject' character who refuses to be banished. Despite the best efforts of Antoinette's husband and his threats to bring the full force of the patriarchy to bear on her, she prevails and even tries to save Antoinette from a future with him.

successful genre because the reader enjoys exploring the relationship between 'self' and 'other', and revels in exploring the monstrous elements of the human condition.

The rise of the gothic coincided with a period of great change in the Western world, and the genre capitalised on some of mankind's longstanding fears. The 'monstrous female' subsequently became one of the most enduring and malleable tropes of the masculine gothic tradition.

> The female monster […] wears many faces: the amoral primeval mother […] vampire […] witch […] women as monstrous womb […] woman as bleeding wound […] woman as possessed body […] the castrating mother […] woman as beautiful but deadly killer […] aged psychopath […] the monstrous girl-boy […] woman as non-human animal […] woman as life-in-death […] woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*[105]

However, some female writers succeeded in exploiting these stereotypes in order to create their own brand of Gothic - the 'feminist gothic' - which exposed the fragility of the relationship between woman as 'distressed heroine' and woman as 'disturbing perpetrator'. Not only did these writers provide a more fully fleshed out picture of womanhood but their texts would have had an empowering effect on their readers. Readers who would have previously seen women in purely binary terms, and been led to believe that it was 'better that a woman be a pure dead virgin, better that she lose her head and her heart than to remain a seductive, "voluptuous" wanton," a "foul thing for all eternity"'[106], began to discern that 'goodness' and devotion to family should not come at the expense of emotional and sexual fulfilment. The marital gothic novels *Rebecca* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are examples of this particularly feminist metamorphosis of the original tradition. This transformation supports the view that, for many women, there is no such thing as 'happily ever after'. For the central female characters in marital gothic narratives, like the women whose lives they reflect, marriage is an institution in both senses of the word. Husband replaces father,[107] but little else changes for women living under the delusion that marriage and motherhood constitute an ultimate prize. The marital gothic gives voice to the rage of women who are tired of struggling to see themselves represented. In service of this readership, novelists like Rhys and du Maurier succeed in manipulating aesthetic traditions, using images and tropes from the past to create a revised vision of marriage.

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[106] Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, 125.
[107] Massé. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic*, 17.

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